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“A True Conception of History”: “Making the Past Part of the Present” in Late-Victorian Historical Romances

**Dr. Anna Vaninskaya
University of Edinburgh**

In his Address to the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1889, William Morris defined “romance” as “the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present.” The immediate context of the phrase was a discussion of the necessity of seeing beauty in daily life, but the statement could equally well have served as the beginning of a literary manifesto, for by 1889 Morris was devoting more and more time to the composition of historical romances.¹

When he turned from epic poetry to prose in the 1880s, Morris joined a large cohort of writers who earned their daily bread by peddling different “conceptions of history” in romance form. By the end of the nineteenth century historical fiction dominated the British literary market: minor authors (now largely unread) made entire careers from its production, major novelists also tried their hands at the genre first popularised by Scott, and enterprising publishers brought out title after title, aimed at children and adults and dealing with every conceivable period of the past. Some sold in the hundreds, others in the hundreds of thousands; some became the staple fare of school textbooks, others remained in limited editions on the shelves of a few appreciative aesthetes, others still appeared and disappeared with the rest of the serialised ephemera of cheap print. The historical romance was not a rigidly defined form: it could commence with theoretical prefaces and introductions or plunge directly into the action; it could draw on any number of related genres – from Gothic to travel

¹ Romance is notoriously difficult to define, but in the period in question it could refer to almost any type of narrative distinguished from the realist novel of contemporary everyday life by the use of exotic settings, adventure, and supernatural or improbable incident. In this chapter I use “historical romance” more or less interchangeably with “historical novel,” following the practice of many late Victorians, but it should be borne in mind that not all of them regarded the two terms as synonymous. For a discussion of the generic issues involved see Anna Vaninskaya, “The Late-Victorian Romance Revival: A Generic Excursus,” *English Literature in Transition* 51.1 (January 2008): 57-79.

writing; it could make an ostentatious display of research and erudition with lists of sources, footnotes, and detailed archaeological descriptions, or present itself as a flight of fancy, seemingly unencumbered by documentary accuracy. Nor did British authors feel obliged to confine themselves to the island past -- the whole world was fair game, and everything was a matter of interpretation. When it came to constructing national identity, tales of Egyptian priests or Christians in the Roman Empire could be moulded to the author's ideological ends as easily as the adventures of Elizabethan seafarers. Rome, of course, offered a widely recognised precedent for the British Empire, but some novels went so far as to claim that Christianity itself had originated in England. The Middle Ages also loomed large: Vikings and Normans were as much a part of collective memory as Arthur and the Anglo-Saxons, and even Gothic tribes and Flemish craftsmen became grist to the mill of Morris's English history. In fact, the nation's very mongrelism -- the familiar mixture of Celts, Romans, Saxons, Norsemen, and Normans -- gave licence to the most geographically wide-ranging interpretations of national origins.

This chapter takes as its subject two Victorians, William Morris and Arthur Conan Doyle, who both produced highly distinctive historical romances, but who approached the task of making the medieval past part of the Victorian present -- or rather, the Victorian present part of the medieval past -- in very different ways. But before launching into a close reading it is worth saying a few more words about the genre as it had developed by the last two decades of the century. As has already been mentioned, the output of historical fiction increased dramatically in the context of the end-of-century publishing boom. Simon Goldhill, in his new study of Victorian novels of ancient Rome,² offers several striking estimates: over two hundred novels on Roman themes were published in the century prior to the Great War; a significant jump occurred in the 1870s, and another in the 1890s. In fact,

² Simon Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

half of the texts in question appeared in the three decades after 1890, while “eleven earlier novels were reprinted and repackaged, especially for the newly flourishing American market” (218). These are merely classical novels, of course, and a tally of romances set in other historical periods would likely yield similar results.³ One is dealing, then, with a generic category of over a thousand titles, many of which -- as one would expect when faced with such figures -- could indeed be classified as formula fiction or hack-work, self-consciously operating within a strictly circumscribed set of established conventions. This is quite a significant caveat to the earlier claim that the form was not rigidly defined. Certainly if one confines the discussion to texts produced in bulk for a juvenile audience – G. A. Henty’s, say, who sold tens of millions of copies of nearly a hundred historical adventure titles – formal experimentation will not be a prominent feature. For every famous name that one encounters -- a Bulwer-Lytton, Ainsworth, Thackeray, Charles Reade, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Robert L. Stevenson, or H. Rider Haggard -- there are scores of unknowns – many of them, to be sure, reprinted numerous times in the Victorian period, perhaps even offered as school prizes into the early twentieth century, but since then consigned to the oblivion of research libraries. Nor should one assume that the famous names necessarily achieved a greater level of sophistication than the deservedly forgotten. It is a critical cliché that the historical novels of the major mid-Victorian realists were comparative failures, and formal innovation could be found in the most unexpected quarters.⁴

Another important point flagged up by Goldhill’s study is the occupational provenance of the historical novelists, most of whom were not full-time historical novelists at all, but (if they were men) politicians, clergymen, professional scholars, headmasters or other

³ The most well known contemporary bibliographies, such as Jonathan Nield’s *A Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales*, 2nd ed. (London, 1902) and subsequent editions, only show the tip of the iceberg.

⁴ See, e.g. John Bowen, “The Historical Novel,” in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, eds. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesig (Blackwell, 2002): 244-59.

educationalists.⁵ Whatever impact this fact might have had on the literary quality of the romances, it did guarantee their ideological instrumentality: these were novels designed to push particular agendas, political, religious, or otherwise. Now, in analysing even the most aesthetically sophisticated work of fiction one has to take account of its ideological dimension, of its engagement with contemporary debates and preoccupations. But when it comes to the pedestrian bulk of what was in essence a mass genre, especially the products aimed at children, the ideological skeleton is less likely to be hidden in the folds of art – one can expect it to be harder, clearer, simpler, and more apparent on the surface. In education this was always the case, especially as the late-nineteenth century emphasis on the inculcation of patriotism and citizenship via English history teaching superseded the earlier focus on religious indoctrination. From the 1880s onwards, the reliance on the fictionalised historical exemplum, the stirring tale of national heroics from the hardy Anglo-Saxon to the honourable General Gordon, was as evident in the elementary textbook as in the teacher-training manual.⁶ Of course, the classical past had served that purpose for the elite since the previous century, and whether English or Roman, working-class or public school, educational uses of the past have long been a subject of study.

But historical fiction has not been combed over with the same degree of commitment, though as Goldhill's research shows, even a sub-genre as seemingly narrow as first-century romance offers a rich seam for historians of national identity in its portrayal of Englishness, its racial stereotyping, theological and political polemics, and intimate engagement with the scholarly tradition of historical writing. The past in these works is a source of contrasts,

⁵ Nele Bemong has uncovered a similar background in the professions for nineteenth-century Belgian and Dutch historical novelists.

⁶ See Stephen Heathorn, *For Home, Country, and Race: Constructing Gender, Class, and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880-1914* (University of Toronto Press, 2000), and Peter Yeandle, "Empire, Englishness and Elementary School History Education, c.1880-1914," *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* 3 (2003): 59-72, and "Englishness in Retrospect: Rewriting the National Past for Children of the English Working Classes, c.1880-1920," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 6 (2006): 9-26.

parallels, continuities, and genealogies, models and warnings, “reproof” and “edification,” it is the progenitor, the origin of the present and it is always interpreted through a contemporary lens. And whether one is looking at an evangelical Christian tale of martyrs in ancient Rome or an imperialist adventure on the Spanish Main, modern controversies and expectations inevitably come to the forefront, often in an explicitly didactic form. For many writers – Charles Kingsley and Cardinal Newman are probably the most famous -- historical fiction was but one weapon in an arsenal which also contained every other form of expression, from sermons to pamphlets, honed to make their ideological point in polemical battle. Kingsley’s triumphalist Victorian Teutonism was inextricable from his anti-Catholicism, so when he came to write *Hereward the Wake* (1866), he ensured his character’s muscular Viking virtues emerged against the background of eleventh-century priestly inadequacy – and that was quite a sophisticated handling when placed beside the astonishing crudeness of the analogies and clichés analysed by Goldhill. As the ideological controversies and historiographical assumptions succeeded each other over the course of the century, so did their representation in romance form. The Goths and Romans of Wilkie Collins’s *Antonina*, published in 1850, are very different beings indeed from William Morris’s Goths and Romans in *The House of the Wolfings* of the late 1880s.

But there is another important imperative -- also ideologically inflected, but ultimately transcending every local context -- which has to be considered in any discussion of historical fiction, and that is the basic impulse towards reconstruction. The Victorian historical novel’s persistent frame-breaking was a double-edged habit. The appeal to the reader, the allusion to contemporary realities, the intertextual reference to Scott, Macaulay, or Freeman, the footnote arguing with previous scholarly authorities: all this brought the past rudely into the present, but it could also serve to buttress the audacious reconstruction of a bygone reality that no actual records preserved. The quest for accuracy, faithfulness, antiquarian precision,

was never incompatible with the wildest speculation -- on the contrary, the greater the display of the author's learning, the more liberties, it seems, could be taken to fill in the gaping holes of the historical record. Reconstruction worked on both planes: its end result may not have been a closer approximation to what we would recognise as "real history," but for the serious artist it always entailed the creation of a self-sufficient and internally coherent world. In the lower reaches of the market generic convention often proved stronger than either historical accuracy or integrity of conception: as Goldhill describes, "scenes [were] self-consciously repeated with variation from book to book ... other literary forms, such as the school novel, provide[d] a narrative framework" (231). But if schoolgirl fiction in togas, which dusted its clichés with the barest sprinkling of scholarship, was not the surest guide to historical truth, adult novels which suffocated under a weight of research their narratives could hardly bear were hardly any more plausible in purely scholarly terms. Kingsley, in the footnotes to *Hereward the Wake*, indulged in much abstruse genealogy and quoting of medieval manuscripts, only to let his imagination run wild whenever he came to a gap in the record (which, needless to say, was often). The pleasures of imaginative reconstruction, of the reinvention of a lost world, were enabled but never encumbered by the autonomous demands of the historiographical material.

And few late-Victorians could match William Morris for fecundity of imagination. In the late 1880s and 1890s Morris wrote a series of "medievalist" romances of which three are identifiably historical, despite their fantastic elements. Two of these, *The House of the Wolfings* (1889) and *The Roots of the Mountains* (1890), are set among the Barbarian Germanic tribes of Central Europe, and furnish perfect models of the interaction between Victorian socialist ideology and historiographically informed reconstruction of the highest order. This chapter will focus on the third: the shorter and better-known (not to mention significantly cruder and more instrumental) *A Dream of John Ball* (1888), a tale of a

Victorian socialist who wakes up in the fourteenth century and witnesses the beginning of the Peasants' Revolt. Morris brought up the Peasants' Revolt more than once in his publications for the socialist periodical press, and though *A Dream of John Ball* was a short romance, not a historical commentary, it also first appeared as a serial in a socialist newspaper (*The Commonweal*). It was different from Morris's two tales of Germanic tribes -- in terms of length and subject matter most obviously, but also in its use of actual historical events, and, as Morris's daughter observed, "in the mood in which it was written, and in the fire and concentration felt behind the easy flow of the narrative. It is ... a Confession of Faith."⁷ Indeed, Morris seems to have identified with Ball, the charismatic rebel priest, more than with most of his other characters. In an 1884 letter to the *Manchester Guardian* he proclaimed that John Ball "lives still, though I am but a part, and not the whole of him Nor will he quite die as long as he has work to do."⁸ But when it came to turning historical fiction to political purposes, *A Dream of John Ball* established the pattern for the later romances, infusing certain ideologically kindred aspects of the nationalist historical discourse with the socialist ethic.

From the thematic point of view, John Ball's speech at the cross was one of the two core sections of the tale. If the concluding dialogue between Ball and the dreamer-narrator was significant for its Marxist exposition of economic development, the earlier, more lyrical address was destined to become one of the best-known Victorian descriptions of socialist communal values. It was also, unlike the conversation, partially grounded in historical record, although the "Fellowship is heaven, lack of fellowship is hell" peroration -- the most distinctive part of Ball's sermon from the socialist standpoint -- was not found in Froissart's

⁷ William Morris, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, vol. 17 (Longmans, Green & Co., 1910-15): xiiij.

⁸ Norman Kelvin, ed. *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, vol. 2 (Princeton UP, 1984-1996): 326. Morris makes much of John Ball's relevance throughout the letter.

original chronicle upon which Morris drew for Ball's more familiar lines.⁹ In this supplementary section Morris's Ball proclaims: "he who doeth well in fellowship, and because of fellowship, shall not fail though he seem to fail to-day, but in days hereafter shall he and his work yet be alive, and men be holpen by them to strive again and yet again" (*CW* 16: 233). The presence of this new, forward-looking element in Ball's speech is explicitly tied to Morris's political agenda. As numerous critics have remarked, "Transposed into modern terms, this sermon could be heard weekly at the socialists' outdoor pitch" in London: Ball's "medieval sermon" to the men of Kent and Morris's "socialist lecture[s]" delivered to Victorian workers emphasised the same kind of unity and preached the same hope.¹⁰ But the historically spurious focus on fellowship was not just Morris's way of endowing the uprising with modern socialist overtones -- the parallel between the fourteenth and the nineteenth century both depended upon and enabled a much broader dialectical model of development to which the Marxist Morris subscribed, and which became the subject of the final and entirely fictional dialogue between Ball and the dreamer-narrator.

The illusions fostered by capitalist false consciousness, the narrator tells the priest in the concluding section of the romance, must inevitably intervene between the imperfect communal ethic of the Middle Ages and its more ideal incarnation in the socialism that would grow out of the struggles of the late 1800s. The historical movement is one of negation followed by transcendence: "Then shall those things, which to thee seem follies, and to the men between thee and me mere wisdom and the bond of stability, seem follies once again."

⁹ Jean Froissart, *The Chronicle of Froissart*, trans. Sir John Bouchier Lord Berners, vol. 3 (London: David Nutt, 1901): 224. See Michael Holzman, "The Encouragement and Warning of History: William Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*" in Florence Boos and Carole G. Silver, eds., *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris* (University of Missouri Press, 1990): 102.

¹⁰ Margaret Grennan, *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary* (King's Crown Press, 1945): 81-2. Cf. Stephen F. Eisenman, "Communism in Furs: A Dream of Prehistory in William Morris's *John Ball*," *Art Bulletin* 87.1 (March 2005): 100: "With just a few changes, Morris's words might have described a march of unemployed British working men and women through Trafalgar Square." Near-contemporaries also recognised the parallel: James Boyle in *What is Socialism?* (The Shakespeare Press, 1912) claimed that Ball's preaching sounded like "an extract from a speech by a Modern Socialist orator" (211).

For nothing can permanently hinder the “Host of the Fellowship”: “yet shall all bring about the end, till thy deeming of folly and ours shall be one, and thy hope and our hope; and then – the Day will have come.” The convergence of medieval and Victorian worldviews which this passage anticipates is part of the same historical spiral that also links the dream-vision of the past to the utopia of the future, and the gathering of the armed freemen of Kent about the cross in this romance to the earlier Germanic Folk-moots in the forests of Central Europe in *Wolfings* and *Roots*. For the fourteenth-century English rebels were not the originators of the communal ethic in Morris’s theory of history. They were simply the descendants of the Teutonic tribes who fought against Roman domination, and whose resistance was re-enacted in the medieval struggle of the peasants and artisans against feudalism, and of the workers against capitalism on the final ring of the historical spiral. More than a thousand years separated the assembly of the Mark-men about their leader in *Wolfings* from its mirror image in the village of Kent, but the Fellowship preached by Ball was as much a re-embodiment of the principles of the tribal constitution as an anticipation of the socialism of the nineteenth century. As the symbolic Day dawns John Ball tells the narrator: “scarce do I know whether to wish thee some dream of the days beyond thine to tell what shall be, as thou hast told me.” The dreamer wakes up in his bed in Hammersmith, just as he does again a few years later after having had another dream: not of the fourteenth century this time, but of the “new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness,” otherwise known as *News from Nowhere*, Morris’s famous utopian romance. And it is this dreamer who stands at the cross-roads of the past and the future, who is able to assure the priest: “the time shall come, John Ball, when that dream of thine that this shall one day be, shall be a thing that men shall talk of soberly, and as a thing soon to come about.” The vision of communism fulfilled can only become reality because the socialists of Morris’s time have inherited John Ball’s dream of the Fellowship of Man, handed across the yawning gulf of commercialism: for “if others can see it as I have

seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream” (*CW* 16: 285-6, 211).¹¹

But not everyone shared Morris’s vision, in fact, his interpretation was just one of many available to historical novelists interested in this side of the Middle Ages. When it came to the fourteenth-century revolt, authors had as many choices as there were political or religious ideologies on offer, and as these evolved over the course of the century (e.g. from radicalism to socialism), or varied from one constituency to another (between Anglicans and Catholics, for instance), so the literary adaptations changed with them.¹² Morris’s romance reflected and embodied 1880s socialism; Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The White Company*, a “little chronicle of our common ancestry” inscribed “to the hope of the future the reunion of the English-speaking races [sic],” inaugurated 1890s Greater Britain imperialism.¹³ It was published just a few years after *A Dream of John Ball*, and was as full of patriotic bombast as the former was of socialist speculations.

So they lived, these men in their own lusty, cheery fashion – rude and rough, but honest, kindly, and true. Let us thank God if we have outgrown their vices. Let us pray to God that we may ever hold their virtues. The sky may darken, and the clouds may gather, and again the day may come when Britain may have sore need of her children, on whatever shore of the sea they be found. Shall they not muster at her call? (Doyle 561)

If the military-nationalistic overtones are not apparent from this passage, they emerge clearly enough from the foregoing pages, and one may even detect a hint of Doyle’s Anglo-American agenda. This is historical romance used for conservative rather than radical propaganda, and its handling of national identity is particularly instructive. Doyle’s Englishmen are honest and law-abiding, but also manly and “a race of warriors” with whose “fame” and “wonder” “the whole world ring[s].” “It is not in nature that an English-born

¹¹ For a more detailed consideration of *A Dream of John Ball* see Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History and Propaganda, 1880-1914* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010): 119-30.

¹² For a detailed treatment of various adaptations see Anna Vaninskaya, “Dreams of John Ball: Reading the Peasants’ Revolt in the Nineteenth Century,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 31.1 (March 2009): 45-57.

¹³ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The White Company* (1891; London: T. Nelson & Sons, [1907]): front matter.

man should love a Scot or a Frenchman,” and indeed, unlike the French, the English fight fairly and honourably, sparing the women and children (226, 189, 192, 172-3). The heroes of the book -- the gentle and intelligent Alleyne, the gruff and sturdy Hordle John, the chivalrous and generous Sir Nigel – are the quintessence of the different sides of the English character, and at the end, West Saxon and Anglo-Norman are reconciled and national unity is vouchsafed by the marriage of thethane-descended Alleyne Edricson to Sir Nigel’s daughter. A preference for narratives of unification was not limited to Doyle, or to portrayals of the fourteenth century: as Joanne Parker shows, late-Victorian historical fiction dealing with the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons in England also advocated a welding of the constituent nationalities, and imperialist writers like Kipling carried the impulse into the Edwardian period.¹⁴

But if a nationalistically motivated union concludes Doyle’s romance, the archer Aylward -- a mercenary from the French wars who peppers his speech with many a “mon ami” and “ma petite” -- strikes a strident nationalist note at its very beginning. As soon as he comes on stage he calls for “some good English ale” and swears he is “a true English bowman” who “kissed the good brown earth” of the “dear old land” when he disembarked at Hythe. He listens with approval to a tritely patriotic, not to say jingoistic, song of English bowmen “bred in England the land where the true hearts dwell,” and is thoroughly disrespectful of the Pope. Characteristically, the only occasion when the narrative wholeheartedly takes the side of the poor against the rich is when a patriot tries to demonstrate the inferiority of the spiritless French peasant to his free English counterpart: a familiar theme in nationalist historical writing. The “common folk” of the continent are a “sorry,” downtrodden race, “crushed down” by the lawyers and nobles. The “poor commoner of England,” on the other hand, knows “something of charters, liberties, franchises, usages,

¹⁴ Kipling’s *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (1906) is a very good example of the tendency.

privileges, customs and the like. If these be broken, then all men know that it is time to buy arrow-heads It would scarce pass in England, but they are quiet folk over the water” (72, 77, 111-12). Doyle’s comparison is less about social justice than national superiority premised on virility and the military virtues, with the obligatory nod to Old English liberties.

If Morris were dealing with the same material, he would immediately latch on to those charters and franchises as the seeds of socialism in the medieval community, but Doyle is not concerned with the structures and underlying processes of history, nor with tracing how its development culminates in the ideal political state. He is working with a much more traditional understanding of the “historical”: antiquarian, particularising rather than generalising, preoccupied with individual personalities rather than with abstract social forces. He is meticulous in ferreting out details -- from the geographical to the ecclesiastical -- and careful about displaying his knowledge of obsolete vocabulary and appropriate terminology - - whether it is types of boats or the intricacies of scholastic argument. His unflagging pursuit of authenticity, however, is thwarted by the derivative nature of his language.

Anachronistically seasoned with Elizabethan expressions (for greater “Ye Olde England” effect), full of clichés, tired-out metaphors, and stagy, mock-medieval turns of phrase on the lines of: “‘Bethink you again, mon ami,’ quoth Aylward, ‘that you might do much good yonder’,” Doyle’s style is a cacophonous mixture of the second-hand and the faux-archaic (114-5). An ungenerous observer might say the same of his entire picture of the Middle Ages, and that is why his rare treatments of economic history are all the more interesting, and none more so than his references to the Peasants’ Revolt and the labour question.

Although Doyle has a relish for painting the grotesque sides of medieval life, and cannot be accused of focusing solely on knights and castles, his carnivalesque procession of jugglers, soldiers, criminals, burghers, beggars, milkmaids, and flagellating priests does not betray any deep awareness of the economic dimensions of medieval society. The reader’s

only glimpse of serfs, copyholders, free labourers, or any other representatives of the country working population is restricted to the brawling drunkards and sullen escapee whom Alleyne meets in a tavern, and there is an equivalent gap in the portrayal of town life. Of colourful personages met by the roadside there is no end, but of Morris's nameless artisans, the builders of village churches and authors of communal ballads -- not a one. Nobody works in Doyle's England, though everyone can fight, and the existence of agriculture and the handicrafts is only to be guessed at. When some reference to the nobility of labour is made, it comes from the lips of an idealistic maiden calling on the monks to "do men's work in the world" by joining in the life of the "common people" and fighting wickedness, and thus only serves to reinforce Doyle's masculinist bias. This is exactly what Alleyne the clerk accomplishes by setting out on his path to knighthood, but though he fulfils the "ideal of duty" there is no question of him toiling together with the "borel folks" (182, 194).

The author is aware of class only insofar as it is expressed by rank or caste. His England is relentlessly hierarchical, and there is no place in it for what Morris regarded as the defining characteristic of the Middle Ages -- the spirit of association. The guilds -- Morris's champions of medieval democratic egalitarianism-- are non-existent, and though the White Company itself is a martial fellowship of sorts, it still maintains ingrained social divisions. But it is no wonder that the innocent Alleyne is surprised to behold "the hate which class appeared to bear to class," for Doyle himself acknowledges only one cause for such ingratitude, and that a misguided one. The escaped villain in the tavern resents the fact that his superiors are of French origin as much as if not more than the fact of his exploitation, and the roots of the hatred that Alleyne laments apparently go no deeper than national resentment. The serf's invective is directed mainly against the Norman Yoke -- the "French robber[s]" who dared to "set foot in free England" -- and he seems far less likely to engage in a class war than in a war of liberation against foreign invaders. He does not acknowledge king or

noble, and answers to no one except the local Saxon socman.¹⁵ Not only does the serf stand in the way of national unity, he is also guilty of class insubordination, and everything in his portrayal indicates that the narrator does not approve. He is a bitter, “wild, masterless man,” one of a group of “outlaws” -- “a party against the State” gathered, to Alleyne’s distress, under the leadership of his brother. Treasonous associations mount with the introduction of the future Peasants’ Revolt: a “widespread mutiny,” “breaking out into local tumult and outrage,” in which the fugitive serf will no doubt play a part. But why should the commons be so discontented? Is it not because, as Morris and the contemporary historians upon whom he drew maintained, the feudal lords had decided to reverse the inevitable break-up of villeinage and reassert their economic mastery? Is it due, perhaps, to the strains of the French wars, Wyclifite subversion, John of Gaunt, the Statute of Labourers, or the poll tax? No, according to Doyle, the peasants are discontented because, having won Crécy and Poitiers, they have realised their power and so sent “the whole fabric of the feudal system ... tottering to a fall.” The “fierce mutterings of the lower classes ... culminating some years later in the great rising of Tyler” are due solely to the fact that the knights and barons have lost their claim to being the indisputable guardians of the kingdom (123-5). Thus at a single stroke Doyle dispenses with economic, social, and political causes, reasserts his muscular nationalist agenda, and reduces everything to the level of patriotic military pride. Martial virtues are indeed the proper stuff of romance, and there is no shortage of swordplay and “man’s work” in *The White Company*, but nothing could be further from the historical modelling of *A Dream of John Ball*.

In taking such an approach, Doyle was following in the footsteps of illustrious predecessors: as Joep Leerssen points out, the foundational Belgian historical novel of the fourteenth century, *The Lion of Flanders* (1838), also transmuted “a medieval conflict

¹⁵ A socman, according to Doyle, was a farmer who had no feudal superior, and was answerable only to the king.

between Crown and Town” into a “culture clash between French and Flemish” in line with contemporary nationalistic imperatives. Yet Doyle was too conscientious to confine himself to Norman Yoke clichés and details of armour and heraldry. If not through the narrator, then speaking with the voice of the dissatisfied social elements, he did reveal his reading of economic history, or at the very least of its popularisations. But the accents were laid differently than in *A Dream of John Ball*, where the discussion of shifts in the modes of production and of the historical dialectic was the ideological heart of the piece. Doyle simply took the opportunity to demonstrate his wide-ranging research on various aspects of medieval life, leaving the reader to judge what relevance, if any, it might have to the narrative.

In the context of a discussion about using raw rats to treat the bubonic plague, intended to showcase the ignorance and credulity of the time, a labourer -- already identified as a malcontent and a member of the “disloyal party,” a “rough” and “unkempt fellow” with a “tangled beard and matted hair” -- blurts out the following textbook fact of fourteenth-century economic history: “The black death is the best friend that ever the common folk had in England” because it increases the workers’ bargaining power and wages. Hordle John questions the callous assertion (profiting from others’ death), and another workman reminds the speaker that the plague also leads to the development of commercial sheep farming and the displacement of men from the soil which is turned into pasturage. A tooth-drawer then remarks that this in turn provides work for folk of other professions, and the subject is dismissed with a laugh (66, 59, 67-8). Unless it is meant to imply that the fireside conversation of fourteenth-century labourers consisted of excerpts from the relevant sections of J. R. Green, the purpose of this brief exchange remains uncertain. Telescoping several centuries of historical development as drastically as if it were written for the benefit of a reader whose only interest is Hordle John’s next wrestling match, the passage leaves the narrator’s intent strangely unclear. Are the setting and attribution of the words supposed to

discredit the opinions expressed? What value sign is attached to the emancipation of labour and the destruction of peasant communities? No resolution to these doubts is provided, and the polemical opportunity is lost. Morris handles the issue very differently. His dreamer-narrator sets the transition to sheep farming firmly in the future of his 1381 time-frame, in the days of the development of international trade, when wool becomes the primary commodity. The expropriation of land and proto-capitalist enclosures do not follow vaguely from the Black Death, but are attributed directly to the lords' desire for profit (*CW* 16: 271). The overall place of the episode in the narrator's historical argument is clear, and the explanation itself rigorous.

But when Doyle is not quoting facts inconclusively, he is advancing his conservative sympathies. Earlier in the same scene, the run-away serf launches into a subversive, class-breaking speech worthy of one of Morris's revolutionary Kentishmen. Together with the labourer Jenkin he recapitulates many of the points that Morris himself raises in *Dream*, and that would have been familiar from the standard nineteenth-century accounts of the Peasants' Revolt and from the Froissart version of John Ball's propaganda. "The castle has thrown its shadow upon the cottage over long. For three hundred years my folk have swinked and sweated" for the lord, the villein rages, let him now work for himself! "Are we not all from Adam's loins ...?" asks Jenkins, "Where all this difference, then, between the ermine cloak and the leathern tunic ...?" Allusions to the Norman Yoke aside, this is still entirely Morrisian. But it does not take long for a different note to creep into the conversation. After describing the sale of human livestock, the serf reveals his (literally) incendiary tendencies by fantasising about setting fire to the lord's dwelling. A labourer then declares that priests as much as nobles are the foes of the poor man and thieves who live upon his labour. A forester accuses him of indolence and the two fall to squabbling, insulting the king for not speaking English in the process. At this point the patriotic Hordle John intervenes, saving the king's

name by declaring that “he can fight like an Englishman,” and showing up the cowardly worthlessness of the speakers (63-4, 66). So again, what ostensibly starts out as a protest against exploitation and an appeal for equality, quickly degenerates into rabble-rousing and disloyalty – naturally to be condemned and rebuked with reference to the manly qualities of the true patriot.

The political discussion between the serf and the labourers takes place in the common room of an inn, which serves as a microcosm of Doyle’s vision of medieval society, and an apt symbol of his estimation of the social potential of the lower orders (outside of their skill with the longbow). A comparison of this scene with its counterpart in *A Dream of John Ball* will illustrate the difference between Doyle’s and Morris’s takes on the medieval predicament. Both Alleyne Edricson and Morris’s narrator are clerks, and early on in the books both find themselves in a tavern. But nothing could be more unlike Doyle’s “Pied Merlin” than the “Rose” of Morris’s dream. The room the dreamer walks into is beautiful, and skilfully, if roughly, decorated – quite in the fashion, needless to say, of Morris & Co. The patrons are earnest and serious yeomen, warlike enough, and served by a comely maid; there is no sign of drunkenness or uncouth behaviour, and children play about their feet. When it comes to music, a young man with a clear voice sings a ballad of Robin Hood “concerning the struggle against tyranny for the freedom of life,” and the men take it up with their strong musical voices (*CW* 16: 224). The communal singing is only interrupted by the arrival of the rebel priest, whom the insurgents have been awaiting with impatience, and who will proceed to deliver his rousing speech on fellowship. The room Alleyne beholds, however, seems to belong to a different world. It is a dingy and “smoke-blackened” stable, bare, unpainted, dark and malodorous, lighted by flickering torches – the very opposite of Morris’s bright and lovingly decorated interior. The people inhabiting this nightmarish den are suited to their surroundings, though they are also meant to represent a cross-section of

society: in addition to the escaped villein and the free labourers, there are some verderers, a gleeman, a physician, a limner, and a Cambridge scholar. But the doctor is a quack, the painter a talentless parasite, the scholar a snob who leaves without paying, and the minstrel a “swollen and coarse” drunkard. His singing of a “gross” song is interrupted by nothing so edifying as a socialist sermon on the importance of community, but by the “pure-minded” Alleyne’s outraged exclamation (58, 68). There is fighting, foul language, and plenty of drinking, and the sustained point-by-point inversion of Morris’s scene only serves to highlight the opposing ideological tendency of the romance as a whole. This motley tavern crew is hardly the stuff of a Morrisian medieval community, but even the company of noble friends who emerge triumphant at the end of Doyle’s book do not resemble John Ball’s idea of a Fellowship.

Both Morris and Doyle were engaged, in Leerssen’s words, in “retrofitting” the past -- not in line with the kind of national, linguistic, or religious splits in historical memory which shaped the historical fiction of Flanders and Holland, but in accordance with political commitments that could lead just as easily to ideologically incompatible adaptations of historical material. Different ideologies, like “new events,” could “trigger re-calibrations” and “re-assessments” of the “usefulness” of “established memories,” and the late-Victorian historical romance both reflected already existing and helped to mould new historical memories within a community as internally riven (though not subject to the same linguistic and constitutional turmoil) as the Low Countries. By the end of the nineteenth century, England, like Holland, possessed numerous “denominations” with their own separate public spheres, though certain majority discourses -- thanks to their institutional backing (in education, mainstream political rhetoric, and so on) -- permeated them all to some extent. In *A Dream of John Ball*, Morris addressed himself primarily to a minority socialist constituency, while Doyle’s paeon to imperial patriotism, propagated via colonial and

adapted school editions, was meant for the nation at large. Their respective sales figures reflected the two types of audience, but what brought them together despite these differences was the inevitable meshing of past and present, the infusion of typically Victorian concerns into imaginative reconstructions of a national past. Neither Morris's short romance nor Doyle's three-volume historical novel can be classed with the general run of formulaic fiction invoked at the beginning of the chapter, but only because the subsequent reception of the two works has ensured for them a more secure place in literary history than for their less influential (and therefore forgotten) counterparts. Considered on a purely literary level, Morris's propagandistic parable is not that far removed from the typical ephemeral sermonising which took the Peasants' Revolt for its text,¹⁶ while Doyle's popular narrative is closer to a cheap and sensational action-adventure in its prolixity, derivativeness, and adherence to generic convention than one might expect.¹⁷ But whatever their intrinsic literary "worth," both texts shaped the cultural memory of the Middle Ages in accordance with their authors' own "true conception of history."

¹⁶ See, for instance, the Rev. William Edward Heygate's piece of High Church propaganda: *Alice of Fobbing; or, The Times of Jack Straw and Wat Tyler* (London, 1860).

¹⁷ E.g. Pierce Egan's fifty-five part *Wat Tyler* (London, 1841).